

Tolerance in Swami Vivekānanda's Neo-Hinduism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Antonio Rigopoulos***Ca' Foscari University of Venice, VE, Italy*

Abstract

Tolerance was and still is a key notion in Neo-Hindu discourse. Its systematic articulation is to be found in the speeches and writings of Swami Vivekānanda. Inspired by his master Rāmakṛṣṇa, he proclaimed non-dual (*advaita*) Vedānta as the metaphysical basis of universal tolerance and brotherhood as well as of India's national identity. Conceptually, his notion of tolerance is to be understood as a hierarchical inclusivism, given that all religions are said to be ultimately included in Vedāntic Hinduism. The claim is that Advaita Vedānta is not a religion but Religion itself. Thus Vivekānanda promoted his understanding of Vedāntic Hinduism as *the* world religion based upon what he perceived to be universally valid ethical and metaphysical principles. Neo-Hinduism has had a profound, lasting influence among the educated middle classes of India and Vivekānanda was among those who paved the way for the independence movement of the early 20th century. The popular Western view of Hinduism as being synonymous with Advaita Vedānta is part and parcel of this heritage. The Indian gurus who have become popular in the West in the last hundred years are all indebted to the Vivekānandian model of spirituality.

Keywords

India, Neo-Hinduism, tolerance, Vedānta, Vivekānanda

The Bengali Narendranāth Datta alias Vivekānanda¹ (Calcutta, 12 January 1863–Belur, Howrah, 4 July 1902) was a Hindu teacher and renouncer (*saṃnyāsīn*), the best-known and most influential disciple of his master Gadādhara Chāṭṭopādhyāy alias Rāmakṛṣṇa

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(Kamarpukur, 18 February 1836–Cossipore, Calcutta, 16 August 1886).² After the Bengali intellectual Rāmmohan Rāy (1772–1833), Vivekānanda (lit. ‘whose bliss is discrimination’) was the foremost spokesman of modern Hindu thought and the exemplary exponent of Hindu self-representation and self-awareness – what came to be known as Neo-Hinduism – both in India and in the West.³ Born in the English-educated bourgeoisie of Calcutta⁴ in the *kāyastha* caste (*jāti*), a forward clerical caste purportedly belonging to the warrior/princely (*ksatriya*) class (*varṇa*), Vivekānanda had been trained to become a lawyer.⁵ He received his education at Presidency College, where besides acquiring a good training in Sanskrit and traditional Sanskrit scholarship he also became familiar with the works of European positivistic authors such as Auguste Comte (1798–1857), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) as well as with the thought of David Hume (1711–1776), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860). Though as a youth he joined the reform movement of the *Brahmo Samāj* (the ‘Society of Brahman’ founded in 1828 by Rāmmohan Rāy)⁶ being attracted by the personality of Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884), he was soon dissatisfied with its doctrine which he thought lacked true Indian spirituality. His first meeting with the ecstatic Rāmakṛṣṇa⁷ took place when he was 18 years old, in November 1881, and this was the turning point in his life: he became the guru’s favourite pupil and decided to dedicate his whole life to the spreading of his master’s teaching, grounded in Vedānta metaphysics.⁸ At Rāmakṛṣṇa’s death in 1886, he succeeded him as the head of his community, and in 1887, he and other disciples were ordained as *saṃnyāsīn* in the tradition of Śaṅkara (trad. 788–820 CE), the great philosopher of non-dual (*advaita*) Vedānta.⁹

Non-dual Vedānta as the essence of Hinduism and of all religions. Vivekānanda’s mission and his practical Vedānta

As a *saṃnyāsīn*, Vivekānanda travelled extensively throughout India propagating what he considered to be Rāmakṛṣṇa’s gospel. This was a form of non-dual Vedānta largely based upon its medieval and early modern developments (rather than along the lines of Śaṅkara’s thought),¹⁰ which he conceptualized as the essence of Hinduism and as the one truth underlying all religions.¹¹ Following Rāmakṛṣṇa, he classified the schools of Vedānta as well as all creeds according to the hierarchical scheme of non-dualism (Advaita, the highest form), qualified non-dualism (Viśiṣṭādvaita, a lower form) and dualism (Dvaita, the lowest form), which according to him provided a universal typology of religion.¹² Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and Dvaita Vedānta were understood as the three levels of spiritual growth in man, whatever be one’s conviction, which he argued could be detected even in Jesus’ sayings in the *New Testament*:

To the masses who could not conceive of anything higher than a Personal God, he said, ‘Pray to your Father in heaven’ (*Matthew* 6.9). To others who could grasp a higher idea, he said, ‘I am the vine, ye are the branches’ (*John* 15.5), but to his disciples to whom he revealed himself more fully, he proclaimed the highest truth, ‘I and my Father are One’ (*John* 10.30).¹³

Vivekānanda popularized non-dual Vedānta as what united all Hindus and all faiths, presenting it as the acme of spirituality in agreement with the best findings of Western

philosophy and science. He taught that, beneath their apparent diversity, all religions are fundamentally the same since there is only one supreme godhead or spiritual principle (*ātman*, *Brahman*). As a consequence, he advocated religious tolerance (*dharmik sahiṣ-ṇutā*) or, better said, a *hierarchical inclusivism* of all religions in which Advaita Vedānta/Hinduism stood as the ‘Mother’ of all faiths, being interpreted as the most ancient and refined of them all. In fact, his doctrine of the equality of all religions turns out to be an assertion of the superiority of Hinduism.¹⁴

Vivekānanda was a gifted and passionate orator and his message attracted popular attention at the *World Parliament of Religions* which was held in Chicago from 11 to 27 September 1893. The young Swami (= *svāmin*, master) had decided to attend the conference on his own, without any organizational backing, thanks to the financial support of the *rājas* of Ramnād and Khetri. At the conference, he exhibited a combative frame of mind, ready to outline the exceptional qualities of Hinduism to the other religions represented in the forum.¹⁵ He made a deep impression in the press and in liberal religious circles and began to travel widely throughout the United States, making a number of American converts. In the following years, his fame in the United States as well as in Europe continued to expand – he was the first, influential Hindu preacher in the West – and already in November 1894 he was able to establish the first *Vedanta Society* in New York.¹⁶

In India, on 1 May 1897, he founded the *Ramakrishna Mission* and a year later, in 1898, he established the *Ramakrishna Order* with the monastery (*math*) of Belur¹⁷ as its headquarters. This is an organization which combines the tradition of renouncement (*samnyāsa*) with charitable work, especially through the implementation of educational and sanitation programmes: it was a veritable revolution in the institution of Hindu monasticism.¹⁸ The monks of the *Ramakrishna Order* were and are required to achieve an almost academic curriculum, which comprises the study of science, history, sociology and comparative religions. Overall, it is important to underline that Vivekānanda’s ideology and praxis were part and parcel of the nationalistic ethos which was dominant at the time, aimed at the building of India as a free, independent nation.¹⁹ He was keen to respond to the Western claim of a cultural and scientific superiority by positing India as the storehouse of religious wisdom and as superior to the West in the spiritual domain. He died in 1902, when he was only 39 years old, worn out by his tireless activism and by a combination of diabetes, asthma and malaria.²⁰

Vivekānanda’s ideology is an exemplary expression of a historical and hermeneutic situation. Although he was concerned with the self-assertion of Hinduism which he based upon a careful selection of Hinduism’s own sources, at the same time the way in which he returned to these sources was inevitably mediated by his encounter with the West and must be understood as his peculiar response to it since ultimately his Hinduism was not negligibly shaped by Western models. This is shown by his reinterpretation of Advaita Vedānta, in particular by his implementation of a practical²¹ and socially applied Vedānta – something which his god-intoxicated master Rāmakṛṣṇa never taught – in which the emphasis is on the ethical implications of the identity of the individual Self (*ātman*) and the Absolute (*Brahman*). Thus he insisted on the necessity of an active engagement in social service (*sevā*) through the promotion of education and health programmes and the fight against poverty.²² He taught his Hindu disciples to worship Daridra Nārāyaṇa, that is, god Nārāyaṇa (= Viṣṇu) as manifested in the poor, by means

of providing food and shelter to them: this he extolled as the highest form of devotion. As a consequence, he denounced the injustice of caste discrimination, though he recognized the value of the four *varṇas* (brahmins, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras*) which he interpreted to be based on individual character, that is, ethics and not on heredity as taught by the priestly class. As he argued in what has been labelled his ethics of *tat tvam asi* ('That [= *Brahman*] art thou'; see *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7–6.16.3): 'Every soul that exists is your soul; and everybody that exists is your body; and in hurting anyone you hurt yourself, in loving anyone, you love yourself'.²³

The world is understood as an arena in which everyone must engage in service to others and build up his/her character and moral faculties through the discipline of *karma-yoga*, an inner attitude of detachment (*vairāgya*) from the results of one's actions, both ritual and social.²⁴ On the other hand, it should be noted that Vivekānanda's master Rāmākṣṇa showed little interest in philanthropic activities and was inclined to view one's engagement in the world as one form of attachment to it.²⁵ As Leopold Fischer alias Swami Agehānanda Bhāratī (1923–1992) remarked:

When Swami Vivekananda founded an activist Order and preached an ideal of service he was setting himself up in crass contradiction to his Master Ramakrishna . . . His present-day devotees . . . claim that Vivekananda's Western influenced activism actually goes back to secret instructions imparted by Ramakrishna to the young Narendranath, but there is not the slightest documentary evidence to support this contention. On the contrary, there is one authenticated episode which suggests the opposite. On one occasion Vivekananda confessed to Ramakrishna that he would like to found hospitals, schools and rest homes for the sick, poor and aged of India, whereupon the Master replied: 'If God appeared to you, would you ask him for hospitals, schools and orphanages? I don't think so. Instead you would beseech Him for wisdom, the love of God and Salvation'.²⁶

Be that as it may, Vivekānanda was convinced that his practical Vedānta was in line with his guru's teachings as well as with Hindu tradition. After all, Rāmākṣṇa himself had once pointed out that 'the great souls who retain their bodies after *samādhi*²⁷ feel compassion for the suffering of others. They are not so selfish as to be satisfied with their own illumination'.²⁸ Vivekānanda argued that what sustains the promotion of the 'welfare of the world' (*loka-saṃgraha*)²⁹ through disinterested action (*naiṣkarmya*) is precisely the contemplation of the Self which is omnipresent and the same in everyone. He taught that a series of meditative practices based upon Yoga techniques were the way through which all men could eventually achieve absorption in the *ātman* and experience oneness with *Brahman*. The ritualistic element, so pervasive in Hindu orthopraxis, was significantly downplayed by him.

It is important to point out that it would be wrong to view Vivekānanda's Neo-Hinduism as a misrepresentation or betrayal of a supposedly 'pure', traditional Hinduism. Not only does his work stand out as an exemplary manifestation of the encounter between India and the West but it is also a most powerful interpretation of the supposed nature of Hinduism. The main ingredients of Vivekānanda's ideology were not alien but part and parcel of Indian religiosity, a defensive and at the same time proactive reaction against the onslaught of Westernization and Christian missionizing, though to be sure

they were also influenced by Western traditions of thought (the activism of *sevā* being exemplary in this regard).³⁰ Although in his intellectual formation, Vivekānanda had assimilated European ideas and values, it would be simplistic and altogether incorrect to dismiss his Neo-Hinduism as inauthentic, viewing it one-sidedly as the native restatement of ideas originating in the West.³¹ Vivekānanda was familiar with several non-dual and yogic traditions, primarily in their medieval and early modern developments, and took pains to articulate and synthesize their key teachings which he saw incarnated in his beloved guru.³² In his own times, Vivekānanda's proposal was acknowledged as the quintessence of Hinduism by millions of Indians, first and foremost among the urban middle classes who thoroughly recognized themselves in his brilliant 'essentialization' of Hinduism.

The fact is that a single, monolithic Hinduism never existed. What we call Hinduism covers and has always covered a multiplicity of religious doctrines and practices from which one can freely 'pick and choose'. Though there are some basic common denominators that make up what is conventionally called Hinduism and we can even discern its main components – the Brahminical, the ascetic, the devotional, the folk and the tribal – still the variety of the religions and philosophies that have characterized the Indian subcontinent at least from 1500 BCE is so rich and polycentric that it is impossible to reduce it to one, single 'entity'.³³ Vivekānanda's Neo-Hinduism must thus be appreciated as an intellectually sophisticated reappropriation and reshaping of one's vast, plural heritage.

Hermeneutically Neo-Hinduism represented a new phase, that is, it was a response to Westernization which simultaneously utilized selected aspects of Western culture and religion in order to articulate its purported superiority. The overarching, tolerant inclusivism of India – construed as the abode of spirituality – was implicitly contrasted with an intolerant, exclusivist Christian West. In his colonial inflected vision, Vivekānanda had no alternative but to reduce the complex, pluralistic civilization of the Indian subcontinent to an 'essential' Hinduism which needed to be presented as nothing less than a world religion in order to meet the challenges of a Westernized world. This was inevitable, given that the 'rules of the game' were dictated and determined by the Eurocentric context.

Vivekānanda's hierarchical inclusivism vis-à-vis the Western world

Vivekānanda's universalism and tolerance of other faiths was one of the most impressive examples of inclusivism in the 19th and 20th centuries, as the Indologist Paul Hacker (1913–1979) remarked. Its very openness was a form of self-assertion: an answer to the Americans and Europeans which came out from the medieval and modern tradition of non-dual Vedānta, of which his revered master Rāmākṛṣṇa was taken as the living representative, confirming its perennial truth. Vivekānanda revered his guru as a divine incarnation (*avatāra*), the veritable embodiment and inner fulfilment of Hinduism. Rāmākṛṣṇa was believed to incorporate in himself not only the eternal truth of the identity of *ātman* and *Brahman* but also the spiritual experiences of other religions present on Indian soil: he was exposed and initiated into a variety of creeds –

Tantrism/Śāktism (in 1861, through the female ascetic Yogīśvarī), Vedānta (in 1864, through the master Toṭapurī), Islām (in 1866, through a Muslim teacher), Christianity (in 1874, through readings from the *Bible* by Śambhu Charan Mallick) – which culminated in the vision of Hindu deities (the goddess Kālī, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa) as well as in the vision of Mohammad and Jesus.³⁴ The realization that these variety of faiths and meditative methods (*sādhanas*) all led to the same ultimate goal brought Rāmakṛṣṇa to conclude that all religious paths were good and true.³⁵ Along these lines, Vivekānanda passionately claimed that tolerance and universal brotherhood were India's gift to the world from the time of the *Vedas*. Here is a telling quote from one of his discourses:

India alone was to be, of all lands, the land of toleration and of spirituality . . . in that distant time the sage arose and declared, *ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti* – ‘He who exists is one; the sages call him variously’. This is one of the most memorable sentences that was ever uttered, one of the grandest truths that was ever discovered. And for us Hindus this truth has been the very backbone of our national existence . . . our country has become the glorious land of religious toleration.³⁶

The idea is that all world religions are *encompassed* by Hinduism from their very inception, that is, that Hinduism already anticipated their future developments within itself. The implicit claim is that the world has *already* been conquered by Hinduism – *sub specie* Vedānta – without even knowing it. Therefore, Hinduism must be revered as the all-comprehensive universal religion. To again quote Vivekānanda:

Ours is the universal religion. It is inclusive enough, it is broad enough to include all the ideals. All the ideals of religion that already exist in the world can be immediately included, and we can patiently wait for all the ideals that are to come in the future to be taken in the same fashion, embraced in the infinite arms of the religion of the Vedānta.³⁷

Precisely because he viewed all religions as already contained in the embrace of Hinduism, Vivekānanda was against conversion. Why convert from one faith to another, if all religions are ultimately true given that they all tend to the same goal? Rather, Vivekānanda taught that one should (re)discover the beauty and truth of one's own faith: by doing so, he/she would finally come to realize that all religions are but different paths that lead to the same destination, just like different rivers that flow into the one ocean. While preaching the universal validity of all faiths, he simultaneously advocated the primacy of Vedānta as the highest of them all, being as it were their foundation and their consummation, their final destiny. Indeed, he boldly stated that the idea of god was nowhere else ever fully developed as in India, since the very notion of a universal god, beyond clan-gods, never existed anywhere else. Thus Vivekānanda's tolerance is a hierarchical form of inclusivism, in which even universal, missionary religions such as Christianity and Buddhism are subsumed within the encompassing embrace of Hinduism/Vedānta.

He cogently argued that although Buddhism was the oldest of all missionary creeds having spread itself throughout Asia, yet within India itself – the land that gave it birth – this worldwide religion was nothing more than a sect, that is, a branch of the ancient,

gigantic, many-branched tree of Hinduism. Along these lines was also Vivekānanda's response to Christianity, Jesus being acknowledged as a divine incarnation among the many that were born and continue to be born on the sacred soil of India. Jesus' miracles, teachings and gospel of love were viewed as nothing new, being consonant with the immemorial heritage of *sanātana-dharma*, India's 'eternal religion'. To be sure, there never was on Vivekānanda's part a sustained effort to engage seriously with Christian theology and appreciate its specificity. Rather, Jesus and Christianity were invariably interpreted *sub specie indiana*, that is, filtered and appropriated through Hindu categories. In this way, Vivekānanda aimed at pointing out the superiority of India and Hinduism in all matters spiritual – countering the charges of savagery and cruelty put forward by Christian missionaries – vis-à-vis the Western superiority in the material realm of science and technology. As he used to say: 'The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, walks religiously, marries religiously, robs religiously'.³⁸

By the same token, he was ready to point out that spiritual concerns were higher than material ones and that the inner 'science of spirituality' based upon the experience of countless Indian sages and mystics stood at an incomparably superior plane with respect to outer, quantitative science: whereas the first is subjective and concerns itself with 'knowing oneself' and the secret of life's *meaning*, that is, with the highest goal of man, the other is merely objective and concerns itself with the exterior, physical world whose meaning is but derived from the reality of the Spirit. Vivekānanda even argued that non-dual Vedānta had anticipated science, given that 'science is nothing but the finding of unity'.³⁹ Moreover, even when he conceded that the West was technologically superior to India, he remarked that the ancient Hindus excelled in all sciences such as geometry, astronomy, mathematics and physics, though unfortunately in the course of time their scientific knowledge had come to dwindle or was forgotten.

All in all, Vivekānanda's axiom was that from ancient times Indians possessed the ultimate gnosis (*jñāna*) in the highest religious/spiritual sphere, this knowledge having been revealed to them through the *Vedas*, the uncreated, self-validating revelation (*śruti*) 'not coming from men' (*apauruṣeya*), which was heard/cognized *in illo tempore* by the ancient seers (*ṛṣis*). Such ultimate gnosis would have also engendered scientific knowledge though this was viewed as an inferior, derivative kind of knowledge, possibly this being the reason why it subsequently came to be disregarded.

Tolerance and inclusivism in the religions and philosophies of India. The Sanskrit doxographies

Tolerance and inclusivism were ancient practices in India and not an invention of Vivekānanda. Indeed, India has had a long tradition of accommodation through dialogue. Besides the famous dictum of *R̥gveda* 1.164.46, which Vivekānanda himself recalled – 'They have called him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni and also the celestial great-winged Garutmān; for, although one, the wise speak of him diversely (*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*): they call him Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan' – the idea that god or the ultimate principle is one though it may be called by different names, that is, cognized in multiple ways, was a widespread conviction from old times. A later adaptation of *R̥gveda* 1.164.46 is even found at the conclusion of the authoritative *Law Code of Manu* or

Manusmṛti, presumably dating from around the first centuries CE (12, 123): ‘Some call him Fire, some Manu the Prajāpati [= Lord of Creatures], others Indra, still others Breath, and yet others the eternal *Brahman*’.

As is well known, the rock and pillar edicts of the third Mauryan emperor Aśoka⁴⁰ (ca. 272–231 BCE) were intended to promote a code of conduct encouraging religious harmony throughout his vast empire. Although the real motifs behind Aśoka’s ‘conversion’ to non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) after the conquest of the Kāliṅga region (modern day Orissa) are a matter of dispute, it is a fact that a recurrent leitmotif in his edicts is the call to respect all creeds and the insistence on general ethical principles which might be acceptable to all. Apparently, he was willing to protect many different forms of religious belief and practice. Despite its limits and ambiguities,⁴¹ the religious policy of Aśoka has been one of the most remarkable cases of officially instituted tolerance. As Wilhelm Halbfass writes: ‘The most memorable testimony of an ethical and universalistic concept of *dharma* that also serves to reconcile various forms of belief and ethnic communities is offered by the famous edicts of Emperor Aśoka’.⁴²

But more to the point, the peculiar ‘concordance’ (*samanvaya*) or harmonization of the various Hindu philosophical schools (*darśanas*) within a hierarchical scheme can be appreciated in the many Sanskrit doxographies⁴³ which were written from around the 14th to the 17th centuries, the most popular of which is the *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* or ‘Compendium of All Philosophical Schools’ ascribed to the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Mādhava⁴⁴ (14th century). In these texts, we find an idealized representation of the systems of Hindu philosophy progressing in order of their acceptability, starting with the ones which are thought to be the most distant from ultimate truth – such as the materialist school of the Cārvākas/Lokāyatās – and culminating in the highest philosophy, the identification of which obviously depends on the author’s own affiliation. In a hierarchical, dialectical fashion, each *darśana* is presented as a corrective to the one that came before it. In the *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha*, which presents a summary of 16 philosophical systems, the culmination of such dialectical process of ascending knowledge is identified in Advaita Vedānta which is praised as the pinnacle of truth, encompassing all other doctrines.

To be sure, Advaita Vedānta claims to include all other convictions and to be their fulfilment. In Śāṅkara’s system of thought, one comes across the doctrine of the two truths (*dve satye*). Although there is one and only one ‘supreme truth’ (*paramārtha-satya*) which coincides with the direct knowledge/recognition of *Brahman*, yet the ‘relative truth’ (*vyavahāra-satya*) of the conventional, illusory world of appearances (*māyā*) is also acknowledged. In Hindu doxographies, the idea is not so much that the philosophical systems that precede the last one are wrong and need to be rejected but rather that they are only *partial* understandings of reality, that is, stages on the way to absolute truth. In other words, there is an implicit recognition that there is some degree of truth in them, although such truth is limited and needs to be expanded by ‘climbing the ladder’ of knowledge up to its highest level.

In India, the writing of hierarchically arranged compendia (*saṃgrahas*, *samuccayas*) of philosophical schools was a widespread practice especially among Advaita Vedāntins and Jains but also within the Buddhist milieu. Particularly relevant for an understanding of the Indic notion of tolerance is the Jaina doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (lit. ‘many-sidedness’), which recognizes the multiplicity and relativity of views. Its core idea is that since

reality is perceived differently from diverse points of view, it follows that no single statement can express ultimate reality. Jainism therefore encourages the acceptance of relativism and pluralism. Non-Jaina points of view were and are regarded as partial truths within a context of what might be termed comprehensive perspectivism.⁴⁵

In popular religion where the element of *bhakti* or devotion is emphasized, integrative forms of saintliness – especially combining Hindu and Islāmic elements – have been a characteristic feature of Indian culture throughout the centuries. One is here reminded of the north Indian poet and mystic (*sant*) Kabīr⁴⁶ (d. 1518), who flourished in Benares in the 15th–16th centuries, and in modern times of a famous saint such as the Sāi Bābā of Shirdi⁴⁷ (d. 1918) in the State of Maharashtra. Even several Hindu deities are characterized by an assimilative, integrative tendency: an exemplary case is the icon of Dattātreya⁴⁸ whose cult is also centered in Maharashtra.

Clearly, Vivekānanda's inclusivistic tolerance was not something new nor did it originate in a vacuum. Rather, it had illustrious precursors having inspired major strands of Indian philosophies and religions. As Richard King writes:

Vivekānanda's inclusivist claims about 'Hinduism' . . . carry much of their cultural and rhetorical power not just because he so cleverly inverted prevailing orientalist narratives about 'Indian religiosity', but also because he was indeed tapping into the deep cultural reservoir of indigenous self-representations on the subcontinent that have not defined themselves in terms of either an exclusivistic mono-theism or an exclusivistic a-theism, and which have not grounded their claims in a one-dimensional account of truth as singular and context-independent.⁴⁹

Rāmākṣṇa as Vivekānanda's chief source of inspiration. The Theosophical Society

Vivekānanda's chief source of inspiration, his guru Rāmākṣṇa,⁵⁰ is to be regarded as one more representative in this time-honoured lineage of integrative spirituality. From a Vedāntic perspective, he recognized the value of both *saguna* ('with attributes') and *nirguna* ('devoid of attributes') forms of worship and revered Islām and Christianity as different paths that led to the same ultimate goal. It is worthwhile noticing that in Rāmākṣṇa's recorded utterances, one does not find an explicit theorization of Hinduism's primacy over the other religions. He seems to have accepted all creeds as equal, whereas Vivekānanda's universalism was undoubtedly hierarchical. A Brahmin by caste, Rāmākṣṇa spent his whole life as a priest in a temple devoted to the goddess Kālī in the district of Dakshineshvar near Calcutta. He had frequent mystical experiences and over the years attracted a number of followers, among whom were several young men of the *Brahmo* movement. As the Indologist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) wrote in an article which appeared in 1896, 10 years after Rāmākṣṇa's death:

. . . he showed how it was possible to unify all the religions of the world by seeing only what is good in every one of them, and showing sincere reverence to everyone who has suffered for the truth for their faith in God, and for their love of men . . . he accepted all the doctrines, the embodiments, the usages, and devotional practices of every religious cult.⁵¹

Moreover:

His religion was not confined to the worship of Hindu deities and purification by Hindu customs. For long days he subjected himself to various kinds of discipline to realize the Mohammedan idea of an all-powerful Allah. He let his beard grow, he fed himself on Moslem diet, he continually repeated verses from the Koran. For Christ his reverence was deep and genuine. He bowed his head at the name of Jesus, honored the doctrine of his sonship, and once or twice attended Christian places of worship.⁵²

Here follow a few, significant sayings attributed to Rāmākṛṣṇa which undoubtedly influenced Vivekānanda's inclusivist ideology:

As one and the same material, viz., water, is called by different peoples – one calling it *water*, another *vari*, a third *aqua*, and another *pani* – so the one *sat-chit-ananda* – the one that is, that perceives, and is full of bliss – is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Hari, by others as Brahma.

...

As one can ascend the top of a house by means of a ladder, or a bamboo, or a staircase, or a rope, so, diverse are the ways and means to approach God, and every religion in the world shows one of these ways.

Many are the names of God, and infinite the forms that lead us to know Him. In whatsoever name or form you desire to know Him, in that very name and form you will know Him.

...

If in all the different religious systems of the world there reigns the same God, then why does the same God appear different when viewed in different lights by different religions? God is one, but many are His aspects. The head of a family, an individual person, is the father of one, the brother of a second and the husband of a third. The relations or aspects are different, but the man is the same.⁵³

Organizations such as the *Theosophical Society*⁵⁴ founded in 1875 in the United States by occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) were also instrumental in preparing the ground for Vivekānanda's universalist message. The main objects of the *Theosophical Society* – which from 1878 established its headquarters in Adyar, a suburb of Madras⁵⁵ in South India – were and are 'to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinctions of race, creed, sex, caste or color; to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science; and to investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man'.⁵⁶ The organization wishes to blend Eastern spirituality with Western science and its adepts must promise to show towards their fellow-members the same tolerance as they claim for themselves. Symptomatically, the motto of the *Theosophical Society* since its inception is the following: 'There is no religion higher than truth' (*satyāt nāsti paro dharmah*, which was the motto of the Maharajas of Benares). A considerable number of Vivekānanda's supporters, both in India and in the West, came from the *Theosophical Society*. Vivekānanda himself, however, was largely critical of it since he thought that it

distorted Hindu ideas to suit its own doctrines.⁵⁷ In particular, he disapproved its esotericism and the claims of its leaders to communicate with occult masters.⁵⁸

Hinduism as *the* world religion. The application of Vivekānanda's ideology in Indian politics

Through its supposedly timeless inclusivism, Neo-Hinduism – just as classical Hindu thought – committed itself to a 'non-historical' traditionalism, which must be understood as a response to the historical, future-oriented challenge posed by Europe. Vivekānanda was successful in applying and reinterpreting this old integrative model by reducing even foreign doctrines to key concepts of Neo-Hinduism, by appropriating them and neutralizing their antagonistic potential by subsuming them in his assimilative, purportedly 'eternal' (*sanātana*) scheme of things. Most importantly, Vivekānanda's bold expansion of the universalist model brought him to promote Hinduism not just as *a* world religion among others, on a par with Christianity and Buddhism, but as *the* world religion based upon what he perceived to be *universal* metaphysical and ethical principles. Thus we are told that Vedānta is Religion itself.

Vivekānanda's assertion of Hinduism as *the* world religion was something utterly new, in fact a revolutionary move given that what had characterized the Hindu traditions throughout the centuries had been their ethnocentrism, that is, the idea that in order to be a Hindu one had to be born a Hindu: birth/rebirth in India within a particular caste (*jāti*, lit. '[position assigned by] birth')⁵⁹ was seen as a prerequisite for hoping to gain the *summum bonum* of liberation (*mokṣa*) or freedom from rebirth.⁶⁰ According to traditional Hinduism India is the *karmabhūmi* (lit. 'realm of action'), the sole pure land where action bears results. All foreigners – regarded as impure *mlecchas*, 'barbarians' – are inevitably excluded from salvation. Therefore the *Ramakrishna Mission* proudly extols Vivekānanda as a great apostle and as the veritable 'Saint Paul' of Hinduism, he having been the first in history to break the barriers and bring the perennial truth of Vedānta to the outside world promoting it as *the* one, supreme religion of mankind.⁶¹ It should be pointed out that such missionary *élan* was not aimed at conversion. Vivekānanda and the missionaries of the *Ramakrishna Mission* called each and all to *experience*⁶² for themselves – via the appropriate meditative practices – the truth of non-dual Vedānta while remaining Christian, Muslim or whatever be their creed. The claim is that in such a way one would become a better Christian/Muslim, etc and finally come to realize the very essence of his/her own faith.

Vivekānanda's ideology of inclusivism and tolerance was thoroughly adopted by the politically moderate intelligentsia of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) and Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964). The secular manifestation of Vivekānanda's Neo-Hinduism coincided with the Gandhian/Nehruvian project of establishing an Indic civil religion, which is embedded in the Constitution of India itself.⁶³ As Gerald James Larson has remarked:

Gandhi's and Radhakrishnan's⁶⁴ view that all religions are true, and Nehru's agnostic view that the ultimate truth of all religions cannot be determined but can be tolerated within a broad-based democratic polity are both within the boundaries of a Hindu or a Neo-Hindu

interpretation of religion. They are simply two sides of the same Neo-Hindu coin of a broadly tolerant universalism. One is almost tempted to suggest that Nehru was to Gandhi what the apostle Paul was to Jesus of Nazareth, or perhaps better, to keep the analogy within a modern South Asian frame, Nehru was to Gandhi what Vivekananda was to Ramakrishna.⁶⁵

Moreover:

Just as Gandhi had successfully created a mass political movement based on a Neo-Hindu vision of universalism, ‘firmness in the truth’ (*satyāgraha*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*) in pre-partition India, so Nehru successfully created a comparable mass political movement based on a translation, or perhaps better, a kind of ‘demythologization’, of that same Neo-Hindu vision in terms of ‘secularism’, ‘socialism’, ‘a mixed economy’, ‘democracy’, and ‘non-alignment’ in post-partition India.⁶⁶

Though its influence has been neglected, the notion of inclusivistic tolerance has played a significant role in the establishment of India’s secular (*a-sampradāyik*) democratic State. Indeed, there has been a heavy Neo-Hindu ‘invisible hand’ operating from the ‘commanding heights’, on various levels.⁶⁷ Proof of this is the fact that such moderate ideology was fiercely opposed by both left-wing and right-wing movements, represented by such seminal figures as the untouchable leader Bhīmrao Rāmji Āmbedkar (1891–1956) and the Brahmin Vināyak Dāmodar Sāvarkar (1883–1966), the upholder of the ideology of ‘Hinduness’ or *hindutva*.⁶⁸

Hindu fundamentalists are not at all concerned with missionary activities directed towards the non-Hindus outside the subcontinent (beyond India’s frontiers, their interest is confined to the Hindu diasporas). Their objective is the restoration of Mother India’s supposed pristine purity: the enemy is understood to be *within* the society, it being represented primarily by Islām (the country’s second largest religion, nowadays 14% of the whole population) and other ‘foreign’ religious minorities such as Christianity (around 2% of the whole population). Ideally, their objective is twofold: to ‘purify’ the land by marginalizing/expelling/eliminating all non-Hindu ‘invaders’ who ‘pollute’ their sacred soil, and to ‘convert’ the ‘lost Hindu sheep’ who have gone astray, having been seduced by the ‘demons’ of Westernization and secularization.

Nonetheless, what is remarkable is that in recent years Vivekānanda has been appropriated as a national hero by right-wing Hindu movements such as the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) and the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS),⁶⁹ though such an appropriation has inevitably been called into question by his closest disciples and liberal followers.⁷⁰ As Gwilym Beckerlegge has aptly noted: ‘Vivekānanda is a contentious figure . . . Latterly, debate about the nature and extent of the contribution of Vivekānanda’s legacy to the growth of the ideology of Hindutva has found its way onto the critical agenda’.⁷¹

Concluding remarks

As the most successful international guru of the 19th century, the pioneer Vivekānanda paved the way for all international gurus of the 20th century starting with Mukunda Lāl Ghoṣ alias Yogānanda (1893–1952), the author of the popular *Autobiography of a Yogi*

(1st ed. 1946) whose role was crucial in the United States.⁷² All the Neo-Hindu movements which became popular in the West – with charismatic god-mans as their leaders – are to a larger or lesser extent indebted to Vivekānanda's model. Rooted in non-dual Vedānta metaphysics, their emphasis is on devotion to god and the guru, some kind of yogic or meditative technique, and social service.⁷³ Remarkably, several of these Neo-Hindu groups have adopted as their logo an emblem of inclusivism.⁷⁴ Thus the movement of the cosmopolitan guru Ratnākaram Satyanārāyaṇa Rāju alias Sathya Sāi Bābā (1926–2011)⁷⁵ – centred in the ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam (lit. 'Abode of highest peace') on the outskirts of the village of Puttaparthi in the southern State of Andhra Pradesh – has adopted the so-called *sarva-dharma* emblem, an open lotus in which each of the five petals bears the symbol of one of the major religions present in India (the *Om* for Hinduism, the Wheel for Buddhism, the Fire for Zoroastrianism, the Crescent and Star for Islām, and the Cross for Christianity). The symbol of Hinduism is regarded as supreme – the *Om* being viewed as the primeval *mantra* – and significantly placed in the highest position, that is, the upper petal. Thoroughly in agreement with Vivekānanda's ideal, this powerful emblem teaches that all religions lead to the same, transcendent goal, represented by the centre of the lotus. Here is the blossoming lotus lamp which stands for the spinal cord channelizing the fire of Yoga, leading to the end of the painful round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*) through the recognition of one's identity with *Brahman* as solemnly proclaimed in the 'great sayings' (*mahā-vākyas*) of the *Upaniṣads*.

Along these universalist lines, the guru of Puttaparthi taught:

Let the different faiths exist, let them flourish, let the Glory of God be sung in all the languages and in a variety of tunes; that should be the ideal. Respect the differences between the faiths and recognize them as valid as far as they do not extinguish the flame of unity.⁷⁶

...

Chronologically and logically, Vedic Dharma is the grandfather, Buddhism the father, Christianity the son, and Islam the grandson.⁷⁷

...

There is only one God, and He is omnipresent; there is only one religion, the religion of love; there is only one caste, the caste of humanity; there is only one language, the language of the heart.⁷⁸

Notes

1. For an introduction to Vivekānanda's life and teachings, see Killingley (2013). See also Sen (2013) and Raghuramaraju (2014). On the critical study of Vivekānanda, see Beckerlegge (2013b). For an insider's perspective, see Nikhilananda (1953) and Rolland (1930). For an overview of Vivekānanda's writings, see Paranjape (2015) and Sen (2006). A synthesis of Vivekānanda's creed can be found in the article *What We Believe In*, which the Swami himself wrote on March 3, 1894 while in Chicago (http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_4/writings_prose/what_we_believe_in.htm). Several movies have been devoted to Vivekananda's life and message; see *Swami Vivekananda*, directed by Amar Mullick (1955); *Vivekananda*, directed by Ganapathi Venkataramana Iyer (1998); *Vivekananda by Vivekananda: His Life in His Own Words* (Sri Ramakrishna Math Chennai, 2012);

The Light: Swami Vivekananda, directed by Utpal Sinha (2013). See also a documentary produced in the 1960s by Films Division Govt. of India, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwzDKKKOfcE>.

2. For an introduction to Rāmakṛṣṇa, perhaps the best-known saint of 19th century India, see Sen (2013). On Rāmakṛṣṇa's life, see *Life of Sri Ramakrishna. Compiled from Various Authentic Sources*. With a Foreword by M. K. Gandhi. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964 (1924); Rolland (1929). See also the controversial monograph by Jeffrey J. Kripal (1998), which insists on Rāmakṛṣṇa's purported homosexuality. An insiders' response to it is provided by Tyagananda and Vrajaprana (2010). For an anthology of the *guru's* teachings, see Gupta ('M') (1942) (available at <http://www.vedanta-nl.org/GOSPEL.pdf>; all quotes are taken from this online version). See also Ramakrishna (1949). On Rāmakṛṣṇa and his entourage, see Isherwood (1965).
3. See Radice (1998).
4. Officially renamed Kolkata on January 1, 2001.
5. Narendranāth's father, Vishwanāth Datta (1835–1884), was a well-educated, agnostic gentleman (*bhadralok*) who served as an attorney at the Calcutta High Court. Narendranāth's mother, Bhuvaneshwarī Devī (1841–1911), was a pious woman whose religiosity deeply influenced him. The couple had four sons and six daughters and Narendranāth was their sixth child. With his father's death in 1884, when Narendranāth was 21 years old, the family was reduced to dire poverty.
6. On Rāmmohan Rāy and the *Brahmo Samāj*, see Kopf (1969); Kopf (1979).
7. Frequently Rāmakṛṣṇa would lose ordinary consciousness and enter into states of absorption (*samādhi*), of divine communion. With reference to his recurrent ecstatic moods, his wife Sārādā Devī (1853–1920) reported:

I have no words to describe my wonderful exaltation of spirit as I watched him in his different moods. Under the influence of divine emotion he would sometimes talk on abstruse subjects, sometimes laugh, sometimes weep, and some time become perfectly motionless in Samādhi. This would continue throughout the night. There was such an extraordinary divine presence in him that now and then I would shake with fear and wonder how the night would pass. Months went by in this way. (Gupta 1942, 50–51).

8. On his becoming a pupil of Rāmakṛṣṇa, see Swami Nikhilānanda's account in Gupta (1942, 66–70).
9. It should be noted that even Vivekānanda's grandfather, Durgāprasād Datta, had renounced the world. He became a *saṃnyāsīn* soon after the birth of his first child Vishwanāth in 1835.
10. Apparently his first encounter with non-dual Vedānta was through such medieval texts as the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* and the *Aṣṭāvakra-gītā*, therefore outside of Śāṅkara's orthodox tradition.
11. He based his teachings on Yoga – the tetrad of *bhakti-*, *karma-*, *rāja-* and *jñāna-yoga* – interpreted in the light of Advaita Vedānta metaphysics. In his lectures he often referred to Patañjali's *Yoga-sūtras*, the foundational text of Yoga philosophy. On the Yoga that Vivekānanda popularized in the West, see De Michelis (2004, 91–126, 149–80). See also Syman (2010); Albanese (2007); Strauss (2005).
12. See Gupta (1942, 51–52).
13. Vivekananda (1962–1997, Vol. 2, 143).
14. On Vivekānanda's inclusivism, see Halbfass (1988, 228–46). On the notions of inclusivism and tolerance in the encounter between India and the West, see Halbfass (1988, 403–418). See also,

- Coward (1987). The first to utilize the term inclusivism (*Inklusivismus*) was Paul Hacker in an article which appeared in 1957. On P. Hacker's interpretation, see Halbfass (1995a, 244–52).
15. Besides Vivekānanda who represented Hinduism, there were also other religious representatives from the Indian subcontinent: Pratāp Chandra Majūmdār (1840–1905) for the *Brahmo Samāj*, Vīrchand Gāndhī (1864–1901) for Jainism and Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) for Theravāda Buddhism.
 16. On *Vedānta Societies*, see Beckerlegge (2004, 296–320).
 17. A neighbourhood of Howrah located in the Howrah district of West Bengal, on the west bank of the Hooghly River.
 18. On the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, see Beckerlegge (2013a); Beckerlegge (2006); Beckerlegge (2000).
 19. On Vivekānanda's religious nationalism, see Paul Hacker's article in Halbfass (1995a, 319–36). See also Basu (2002). On Rāmākṛṣṇa, Vivekānanda and the spirits of the age, see van der Veer (2006, 55–82); Brekke (2002, 41–60).
 20. A favourite motto of his was: 'It is better to wear out than to rust out'.
 21. On practical Vedānta, see Halbfass (1995b, 211–23).
 22. On Vivekānanda's *sevā*, see Beckerlegge (2015, 208–239); Beckerlegge (2006). See also Fort (1997, 489–504).
 23. Vivekananda (1962–1997, Vol. 1, 390). This argument had been used by the Indologist Paul Deussen (1845–1919) in a lecture he delivered in Bombay in 1893. Vivekānanda, who met Deussen in 1896, was clearly influenced by him. But the first to attach the notion of ethical applicability to the Upaniṣadic doctrine of identity had been Arthur Schopenhauer, of whom Deussen was a follower. On the issue of caste, Rāmākṛṣṇa once remarked: 'The caste-system can be removed by one means only, and that is the love of God. Lovers of God do not belong to any caste . . . A brahmin without this love is no longer a brahmin. And a pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah;' Gupta (1942, 171). See also Gupta (1942, 174).
 24. He derived the doctrine of *karma-yoga* from the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the 'Gospel of India'. In the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s call to engage in disinterested action for the welfare of the world and in its acknowledgment of three paths leading to the one, ultimate goal – the paths of action (*karma-mārga*), love (*bhakti-mārga*) and wisdom (*jñāna-mārga*) – Vivekānanda saw the confirmation to the fact that Hinduism is a universalist, tolerant religion with a strong ethical imperative (*contra* the discourse of Christian missionaries, who depicted Hinduism as a cruel religion filled with monstrous superstitions). As Richard H. Davis writes:

Through Vivekananda's direction (no doubt influenced by the organizational practices of the Christian missionaries he otherwise disdained), the *Gita*'s this-worldly orientation took institutional form in India in the Ramakrishna Mission. The monastic followers of Ramakrishna would devote themselves not to meditation or devotional worship but instead to alleviating poverty and suffering by establishing hospitals and schools as well as organizing relief during famines and natural disasters. (Davis 2015, 112–13)

Vivekānanda became a paradigm for all those gurus who adopted the *Bhagavad-gītā* as well as other ancient Hindu text for promoting their universal messages, in India and throughout the world. On Vivekānanda's strategic uses of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, both in India and in the West, see French (1991). See also Robinson (2006, 86–91). Memorable are Rāmākṛṣṇa's words on the significance of the *Bhagavad-gītā*:

What is the significance of the Gita? It is what you find by repeating the word ten times. It is then reversed into 'tagi', which means a person who has renounced everything for God. And the lesson of the Gita is: 'O man, renounce everything and seek God alone'. Whether a man is a monk or a householder, he has to shake off all attachment from his mind. (Gupta 1942, 116)

Rāmakṛṣṇa synthesized all worldly attachments by referring to the couplet *kāminī-kāñcana*: woman, i.e. lust, and gold, i.e. wealth.

25. See Halbfass (1988, 227); Jackson (1994, 75–80). To a follower who argued that service to others was the one priority and who did not approve of the master's emphasis on renunciation, Rāmakṛṣṇa once replied:

Can you explain to me how you can work for others? I know what you mean by helping them. To feed a number of persons, to treat them when they are sick, to construct a road or dig a well . . . Isn't that all? These are good deeds, no doubt, but how trifling in comparison with the vastness of the universe! How far can a man advance in this line? How many people can you save from famine? Malaria has ruined a whole province; what could you do to stop its onslaught? God alone looks after the world. Let a man first realize Him. Let a man get the authority from God and be endowed with His power; then, and then alone, may he think of doing good to others. A man should first be purged of all egotism. Then alone will the Blissful Mother ask him to work for the world. (Gupta 1942, 65)

Moreover:

You people speak of doing good to the world. Is the world such a small thing? And who are you, pray, to do good to the world? First realize God, see Him by means of spiritual discipline. If He imparts power, then you can do good to others; otherwise not . . . People who carry to excess the giving of alms, or the distributing of food among the poor, fall victims to the desire of acquiring name and fame. Sambhu Mallick once talked about establishing hospitals, dispensaries, and schools, making roads, digging public reservoirs, and so forth. I said to him: 'Don't go out of your way to look for such works. Undertake only those works that present themselves to you and are of pressing necessity – and those also in a spirit of detachment'. It is not good to become involved in many activities. That makes one forget God. Coming to the Kalighat temple, some, perhaps, spend their whole time giving alms to the poor. They have no time to see the Mother in the inner shrine! (Gupta 1942, 157–58)

The idea is that one must first renounce everything and call on god since he alone is real and all else is illusory: without god-realization everything is futile. Still, Rāmakṛṣṇa did recognize the value of performing charitable, compassionate actions in a selfless spirit. As he once told to Īshwar Chandra Vidyāsāgar (1820–1891), the noted Bengali polymath, educator and philanthropist: 'Through selfless work, love of God grows in the heart. Then, through His grace one realizes Him in course of time. God can be seen. One can talk to him as I am talking to you;' (Gupta 1942, 121). See also Gupta (1942, 177). He even asked one of his devotees to build a water reservoir in a village that had been suffering from a severe drought; see Gupta (1942, 223).

26. Bharati (1980, 95). While speaking to *Brahmo Samāj* devotees, Rāmakṛṣṇa once said: 'Suppose God appears before you; then will you ask Him to build hospitals and dispensaries for

you? A lover of God never says that. He will rather say: “O Lord, give me a place at Thy Lotus Feet. Keep me always in Thy company. Give me sincere and pure love for Thee;” Gupta (1942, 48). See also Gupta (1942, 158, 420).

27. A state of absorption or higher consciousness which is the goal of Yoga. In Vedānta, it stands for the realization of one’s true self (*ātman*). Theistically, it may be understood to mean union with god.
28. In his lengthy Introduction to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Swami Nikhilānanda narrates two episodes in which Rāmakṛṣṇa sympathized with the poor. He states: ‘Sri Ramakrishna’s sympathy for the poor sprang from his perception of God in all created things. His sentiment was not that of the humanist or philanthropist. To him the service of man was the same as the worship of God;’ Gupta (1942, 48). See also Gupta (1942, 65).
29. This compound occurs twice in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, at 3.20c and 3.25d.
30. Paul Hacker has argued that Vivekānanda’s altruism and call for *sevā* – motivated by his identification of god with mankind – was not so much due to Christian influence but rather to the influence of European positivism; see Halbfass (1995a, 330).
31. This is the contention of Hacker; see his article (1978).
32. See Madaio (2017).
33. On the elusive category of Hinduism, see Sontheimer (1989). See also Lorenzen (2006); Llewellyn (2005).
34. See Gupta (1942, 31–47). On Vivekānanda’s sanitization of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s Tantric practices in terms of a universal spirituality, see van der Veer (2006, 46–48, 70–74).
35. In Vivekānanda’s words:

Now, I happened to get an old man [= Rāmakṛṣṇa] to teach me, and he was very peculiar. He did not go much for intellectual scholarship, scarcely studied books; but when he was a boy he was seized with the tremendous idea of getting truth direct. First he tried by studying his own religion. Then he got the idea that he must get the truth of other religions; and with that idea he joined all the sects, one after the other. For the time being, he did exactly what they told him to do – lived with the devotees of these different sects in turn, until interpenetrated with the particular ideal of that sect. After a few years he would go to another sect. When he had gone through with all that, he came to the conclusion that they were all good. He had no criticism to offer to any one; they are all so many paths leading to the same goal. And then he said: ‘That is a glorious thing, that there should be so many paths, because if there were only one path, perhaps it would suit only an individual man. The more the number of paths, the more the chance for every one of us to know the truth. If I cannot be taught in one language, I will try another, and so on’. Thus his benediction was for every religion. Now, all the ideas that I preach are only an attempt to echo his ideas. (Vivekananda 1948, 232)

See also Gupta (1942, 47, 142, 174, 211, 245).

36. Quoted in Halbfass (1988, 231).
37. Halbfass (1988, 238).
38. Vivekananda (1948, 228). He held this lecture at the Shakespeare Club of Pasadena, California, on January 27, 1900.
39. Vivekananda (1962–1997, Vol. 1, 14).
40. On Aśoka’s figure, see the collection of articles in Olivelle et al. (2012).
41. See ‘Aśoka’s Inscriptions as Text and Ideology’ in Olivelle et al. (2012, 157–83).

42. See Halbfass (1988, 330). For an assessment of the notion of *dharma* in Aśoka's edicts, see Hildebeitel (2011, 35–50). On the complex notion of *dharma* in traditional Hinduism and its later reinterpretations in modern Hinduism, see Halbfass (1988, 310–48). See also Olivelle (2009).
43. On the Sanskrit doxographies and the structure of Hindu traditionalism, see Halbfass (1988, 349–68).
44. Reputed to have been chief minister at the Vijayanagara court of king Bukka, who reigned between 1356 and 1377.
45. On these issues, see Dundas (2004).
46. For an introduction to Kabīr, see Burger (2012). See also Hedayetullah (1977).
47. For an introduction to the Sai Baba of Shirdi, see Rigopoulos (2013).
48. See Rigopoulos (1998).
49. King (2010, 108).
50. Rāmākṛṣṇa was and is revered as Paramahaṃsa (lit. 'supreme goose'), a title which is given to the highest category of ascetics who have achieved spiritual perfection.
51. Quoted in *The Theosophist*. A Magazine of Oriental Philosophy, Art, Literature and Occultism. Conducted by H. S. Olcott. Vol. XVIII, No. 2 (November 1896): 109 ('Ramkrishna Paramhansa and His Precepts').
52. *The Theosophist*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2 (November 1896): 109–110.
53. *The Theosophist*, 110–113. On water being called by different names in different languages, see also Gupta (1942, 47, 149); on religions being different means leading to the same 'roof', that is, god/Brahman, see Gupta (1942, 123, 241). Friedrich Max Müller wrote an influential book on Ramakrishna in 1898: *Rāmākṛṣṇa: His Life and Sayings*. London: Longmans, Green.
54. For an overview on the *Theosophical Society*, see Viswanathan (2013).
55. Nowadays renamed Chennai.
56. These, in this precise order, are the three objectives of the *Theosophical Society* given in the 'Information for Strangers' to be found at the back of the early issues of *The Theosophist*, their official journal.
57. Apparently, even Rāmākṛṣṇa disliked it. He didn't approve of the theosophists' search for superhuman powers; see Gupta (1942, 174).
58. On these issues, see Johnson (1995); Johnson (1994).
59. On the orthodox (*smārta*) conceptualization of the caste system, see Halbfass (1991, 347–406).
60. It is noteworthy that entrance to temples considered to be especially sacred, such as the ones housing *jyotir-līngas* ('*līngas* of light', the aniconic representations of god Śiva) or the famous Jagannāth temple of Puri in Orissa, were and are interdicted to non-Hindus.
61. As Swami Nikhilānanda (1895–1973) states in the Preface to his English translation of the opus of Mahendranāth Gupta (1854–1932): 'His [= Rāmākṛṣṇa's] great disciple, Swami Vivekananda, was the first Hindu missionary to preach the message of Indian culture to the enlightened minds of Europe and America. The full consequence of Swami Vivekananda's work is still in the womb of the future'; Gupta (1942, 6). An accomplished writer, Nikhilānanda was the founder of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, of which he remained the head until his death in 1973.
62. On the crucial concept of experience in the encounter between India and the West, see Halbfass (1988, 378–402).

63. Especially articles 14–17. On these issues, see Larson (1995, 214–16).
64. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), philosopher and powerful public figure – he was Vice-President and then President of India – was a major exponent of Neo-Hinduism. Through his many publications he introduced Indian philosophy and Advaita Vedānta to a Western audience; see Radhakrishnan and Moore (1957). For an introduction to his figure, see Halbfass (1988, 251–55, 381–83).
65. Larson (1995, 198).
66. Larson (1995, 199). On how J. Nehru was able to combine Gandhian notions and socialist ideology, see Baird (1978, 73–86).
67. Larson (1995, 216).
68. The term first surfaced in the 1870s in the novel *Ānandamath*, written by the influential Bengali novelist and nationalist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894). It was later utilized by V. D. Sāvarkar in his book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, released in 1923, in order to convey the idea of an essential Hindu identity.
69. See these recent promotional videos on Swami Vivekānanda: <https://www.hssus.org/videos/swami-vivekananda-life-story>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nkc3VfNIPyo>.
70. See the anthology *Vivekananda as the Turning Point: The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2013.
71. Beckerlegge (2008, 1).
72. On Yogānanda and his *Self-Realization Fellowship*, see Foxen (2017).
73. A document of Neo-Hinduism for the West is the anthology edited and introduced by Christopher Isherwood, *Vedanta for the Western World*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948.
74. Some kind of prototype was possibly developed by Rāmakṛṣṇa himself. We read: ‘On the wall hung an oil painting especially painted for Surendra, in which Sri Ramakrishna was pointing out to Keshub [Chandra Sen] the harmony of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions. On seeing the picture Keshub had once said, “Blessed is the man who conceived the idea;”’ Gupta (1942, 159).
75. On Sathya Sāi Bābā and his global movement, see T. Srinivas (2010); S. Srinivas (2008).
76. Steel (1997, 213).
77. Gries and Gries (1993, 160).
78. Gries and Gries (1993, 139).

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